

PHILOSOPHY AND
GERMAN LITERATURE
1700–1990

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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2002

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Baskerville Monotype 11/12.5 pt. *System* L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Philosophy and German literature 1700–1990 / edited by Nicholas Saul.

p. cm. — (Cambridge studies in German)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-66052-1

1. German literature – History and criticism. 2. Literature and philosophy.
3. Philosophy, German. 1. Saul, Nicholas. II. Series.

PT111 .M63 2002

830.9'384 – dc21 2001043838

ISBN 0 521 66052 1 hardback

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CHAPTER ONE

Criticism and experience: philosophy and literature in the German Enlightenment

John A. McCarthy

Selbst die philosophische Wahrheit, die auf die Erleuchtung des Verstandes ziele, kan uns nicht gefallen, wenn sie nicht neu und unbekannt ist.¹

Was endlich die *Deutlichkeit* betrifft, so hat der Leser ein Recht, zuerst die *diskursive* (logische) *Deutlichkeit*, durch *Begriffe*, denn aber auch eine *intuitive* (ästhetische) *Deutlichkeit*, durch *Anschaungen*, d. i. Beispiele oder andere Erläuterungen, in concreto zu fodern.²

PREAMBLE: MAPPING THE TERRAIN

To write an introductory chapter on philosophy, literature, and Enlightenment in the eighteenth century is a daunting task. Realistically, one can offer at best a blueprint for reading individual works of the eighteenth century. Since Pythagoras, Aristotle and Plato, thinkers have had a direct and above all an indirect impact on the intellectual life of subsequent generations in every sphere. It was no different for René Descartes (1596–1650), John Locke (1632–1704), Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713), Benedictus de Spinoza (1632–77), Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1714), Charles de Montesquieu (1689–1755), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–88) or Claude Adrien Helvétius (1715–71). These thinkers launched scholarly debates which spilled over into the more general realm of literature and the public sphere, giving birth to what the Swiss aesthetician Johann Jacob Breitinger (1701–76) labelled *ars popularis* (popular art) around 1740. Fifty years later Christian Garve (1742–98) lauded this style and tone as the best approach for reaching the majority of educated readers – whether of literature or philosophy.³ Popularity in this sense was grounded in the desire to be read outside the academy and to be of practical use.

Moreover, the easy conjoining of philosophy–literature–Enlightenment masks certain residual difficulties. Of course, philosophy is a branch

of literature in as far as philosophy is written. But philosophy does not have to be written, while literature does. Even when it is committed to paper (which is most often), we would not readily describe philosophy as being literary. Philosophy does not *eo ipso* involve communication, while literature can hardly dispense with an actual or imaginary reader in the realisation of its intent. A philosopher philosophises first and foremost alone; the writer writes in the hope of communication with an other. Minimally, Enlightenment is the search for truth and the endeavour to express it in words. Metaphorically, it is an incandescence and the diffusion of light into previously dark corners. The process of *éclairer* – inherent in the common designations for the era: Enlightenment, *Aufklärung*, *les Lumières* – can occur either via philosophy or via literature. In the first case (as seen from the perspective of the solitary seeker) it is likely to be self-enlightenment, in the second (seen from the perspective of the writer) enlightenment of others. Rarely, however, do the two occur separately, even though philosophy in the Age of Reason took a big step towards professionalisation as an independent discipline just as literature captured a large share of the public sphere and evolved towards an autonomous ideal of its own function. The combination of philosophy and literature in the project of the *Aufklärung* amounts basically to a kind of messy mathematics: rigorous logic is coupled with explanatory metaphor. The supreme example of this is Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's (1729–81) early theory of the fable, and its reincarnation in his final plea for religious and cultural tolerance in the fairy-tale-like parable of the three rings situated at the centre of his didactic play, *Nathan der Weise* (1779; *Nathan the wise*). The latter epitomises the epoch.

'Philosophy' derives from the Greek 'philo' and 'sophia': love of wisdom. Wisdom is essentially related to the art of living so as to maximise happiness. It requires conscious reflection. It did not originally refer to formalistic logic and abstract reasoning, but rather precisely to that which Adolph von Knigge (1751–96) offered up with his popular book on social conduct, *Über den Umgang mit Menschen* (1788; *On human conduct*); philosophy as practical wisdom. Literature derives from the Latin 'littera' and 'litteratura'. The former means 'letter', 'mark' or 'sign'; the latter the alphabet, lettered writing. Of course lettered writing can be used to express philosophical thought, although the modern understanding of literature in the narrower sense emphasises not merely acquaintance with letters and books, but polite or human learning and, more essentially, literary culture. In short, enhanced sociability ('Geselligkeit'). While systematic philosophy in its pure form focuses on the (closed) system and often

remains distant from practical matters and inaccessible to a wider audience, literature embraces practical needs and seeks a broader public. Occasionally, the latter celebrates an inquisitive indeterminacy and complexity of meaning in an aesthetically pleasing manner. This is due, at least in part, to the new connotations of 'littera' as 'cipher' or 'hieroglyph' or 'signature' of something concealed or not fully present. One commonly ascribes the origins of this semantic shift to Johann Georg Hamann (1730–88), Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), Lessing and especially Karl Philipp Moritz (1756–93).⁴ Whereas one normally turns to philosophy for truth, literature is the preferred choice for the pleasure of its heuristic encirclements and self-reflexive ramifications. Moreover, philosophy has split into a practical and a theoretical branch, the latter enjoying greater prestige today. However, the actual praxis of doing philosophy in the eighteenth century was not very far removed from composing literature. Philosophers wrote literature; writers engaged in philosophical discourse.⁵

The demarcation between the two fields of agency is therefore not always distinct. This is due not just to the attitudes of the writer but also to the metaphorical style adopted and the genre preferred (dialogue, letter, review, essay, fable, narrative). The best-known representative of the Enlightenment in Germany, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), merely summarised a basic trait of the epoch when he decisively argued against a separation of procedure and style in the doing of philosophy. Strikingly, he argued the point in the preface to one of his most difficult prose works, the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1781, 21787; *Critique of pure reason*). There he saliently remarked that his reader could expect conceptual clarity through discursive logic in tandem with intuitive or aesthetic clarity based on concrete examples and metaphors.⁶ In short, strategies of abstract conceptualisation and aesthetic expression are drawn upon equally. The quotations at the head of this chapter are chosen to draw attention to the fundamental fact of a 'messy mathematics' when exploring the relationships among philosophy, literature and Enlightenment. The rapprochement between critical inquiry and literary expression is a chief hallmark of eighteenth-century intellectual and literary life with its maxim of intuitive thinking.⁷ It was in many ways the 'business' of the Enlightenment.⁸ In any event, philosophy was enlightenment.

The mission of the Enlightenment was to spread light through the use of print media: the light of reason was inscribed in books, books influenced books, readers began to see more clearly, and hopefully to act more reasonably, that is, wisely, prudently. The goal of philosophy

in this sense was happiness here on earth, not the prospect of some transcendental reward.⁹ The Enlightenment was driven by an inherent optimism and belief in the goodness of the human being as it drew on the past and spread through the present working towards a better future by combating ignorance and prejudice. It was, to adapt a term of the German Romantics, a kind of progressive universalisation, but based in reason.¹⁰

Yet true Enlightenment is not canonically encapsulated in the culture of the printed word, which the young Herder and the *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress) writers of 1767–82 abhorred. Strikingly, that protest came precisely at the moment when the *Aufklärung* was about to reach full expression in Immanuel Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, and specifically in his seminal essay 'Beantwortung der Frage: was ist *Aufklärung*?' (1784; 'Answer to the question: what is Enlightenment?'). As a radical form of *Aufklärung*, the *Sturm und Drang* movement represented an emphatic turn to the original Enlightenment ideal of individual self-determination and a turning away from the more ideologically tinged mission of a self-enlightened person actively seeking to educate others to self-determination. It could draw inspiration from the young Lessing's indictment of bookishness and the exhortation to study real life in his early comedy, *Der junge Gelehrte* (1748; *The young scholar*). That insistence upon individual experience could also draw upon the liberating emotional thrust of Pietism (a subjectivist form of Christian devotion) and its later secular cousin, *Empfindsamkeit* (1740–80; sentimentality), which gave rise to such psychological (auto)biographies as Adam Bernd's *Eigene Lebensbeschreibung* (1738; *Description of my life*) and Johann Heinrich Jung-Stilling's *Lebensgeschichte* (1777–8; *Heinrich Stilling's life story*). The original exhortation to release oneself from the shackles of prejudice and habit evolved into the call to enlighten others through literature and through one's own experience. Yet inherent in the extension of philosophy to literature was the threat to 'true' philosophy and 'true' Enlightenment. Committed to print, once-vital concepts flattened out and lent themselves to dogmatic misuse. The discursive nature of literary culture was supposed to serve as an antidote against ideological rigidity, because the dynamism of the bond between writer and reader (especially after around 1760) demanded flexibility. As mere theory or merely insistent information without true communication, philosophy ceases to be philosophy in the Enlightenment's meaning of an active quest for truth. Lessing aptly formulated the nature of that dynamic quest at the beginning of his *Eine Duplik* (1778; *A riposte*). That is why Kant himself defined his times as the

'age of Enlightenment' and not as an 'enlightened age' in his famous essay of 1784, that is, an age of progressing toward a goal, not one of having attained it. Thus, Peter Gay concludes, 'philosophy as criticism demanded constant vigilance'.¹¹

Aimed at self-determination and at the spread of this ideal to others, the Enlightenment thus had (and still has) a dual mission. Essentially ethical in nature, it entails a pedagogical, political, even a militant dimension. The path to the goal also has a dual focus: on reason (with both faculties of 'Vernunft' and 'Verstand'), and on virtue. While reason ('Vernunft') represented for the Enlighteners the highest mental faculty, the understanding ('Verstand') had more immediate practical application. Enlightenment was thus a matter of reasoning (albeit with a shift from the primitive reasoning faculty of 'Verstand' to the discursive reasoning faculty of 'Vernunft') and consequently a question of norms. Virtue in its original meaning of fitness as human being and citizen of the state gave way in the late Enlightenment to the notion of freedom framed both in terms of duty ('Pflicht') and right ('Recht').¹² Friedrich Schiller's (1759–1805) aesthetic project in the 1790s adds the concept of inclination ('Neigung') in emphatic fashion so that the confluence of duty and inclination leads to the idea of the beautiful soul, the most perfect union of virtue and freedom. Whether expressed in terms of the good burgher, the enlightened despot, the poetic genius, the wise Jew or the beautiful soul, the common root is traceable to an overriding message of virtue.¹³

Kant's dubbing of his epoch the 'age of criticism' in the preface to his *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* – he meant the art of critical self-reflection according to the rules of logic and open discourse – is well known. Less well known is Johann Gottfried Herder's formulation in his programmatic *Journal meiner Reise im Jahr 1769* (1810–20/1846; *Journal of my travels in the year 1769*) to characterise his times: the 'age of experience'.¹⁴ Herder meant the term negatively, to designate received notions inherent in the social structures, civil administration, religious customs and social conventions of his day. From these tired practices and intractable forms he wished to move the focus back to organic processes as the source of personal and even cultural development. Echoing Spinoza, he argued that everything was rooted in nature. It was human creative genius as much as empirical observation which promised to unlock the secrets of existence. Because of his insistence on personal experience over received 'experience', he placed great emphasis on the reading act as an animated conversation with the author. If reading is not dialogical and inspired, 'it is nothing!' (JGH IV, 461). It was a typical assessment of the age.

Both Herder and Kant struggled to correlate body and mind in understanding nature and in cultivating the human spirit. These two labels – reason and experience, one by the dominant systematic philosopher of the eighteenth century, the other by one of its most iconoclastic thinkers – capture the philosophical and literary tensions of the German Enlightenment. Resonating with both Cartesian rationalism (‘cogito, ergo sum’; ‘I reflect, therefore I am’) and Charles Bonnet’s (1720–93) sensibility (‘je sens, donc je suis’; ‘I feel, therefore I am’), Kant’s critique of reason and Herder’s focus on the human experience of nature highlight the individual subject (‘ego’, ‘je’) as the centre of scrutiny and the agent of reform. These tendencies of rationalism and sensualism – of the theoretical and the practical – are discernible throughout the age. That epoch was marked not by the human understanding alone, but also by the heart, which had its own reasons to believe in a better future and had its own access to knowledge. Even Kant admitted his project was rooted in a ‘*belief*’ in the ultimate power of reason. As Pascal put it: ‘Nous connaissons la vérité, non seulement par la raison, mais encore par le cœur’.¹⁵ These major tendencies form the basis of the two greatest novels of development from the era, Christoph Martin Wieland’s (1733–1813) *Die Geschichte des Agathon* (1766–7; *The history of Agathon*) and Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795–6; *Wilhelm Meister’s years of apprenticeship*).

The literary and aesthetic revolution with its far-reaching consequences began with Christian Thomasius (1655–1728), reached an early zenith with literary theorists Johann Christoph Gottsched (1700–66), Johann Jacob Bodmer (1698–1783) and Johann Jacob Breitinger, was radicalised by Hamann and Herder, and found classic expression in Lessing, Wieland, Moses Mendelssohn (1729–86), Moritz, Goethe and Schiller. Those literary developments as seen against the philosophical thought of early (1680–1740), middle (1740–80) and late Enlightenment (1780–1800) are the focus of this chapter. History (the Glorious Revolution in Great Britain in 1688, the American War of Independence in 1776, and the French Revolution of 1789), philosophy and New Science all led to new ways of seeing in philosophy, art and literature. While there may not be a direct path leading from the Hamburg patrician-poet Barthold Heinrich Brockes (1680–1747) to the quintessential poet of the age, Goethe, there is a connection between the empirically inspired *Irisches Vergnügen in Gott* (1721–48; *Earthly pleasure in God*) of the former, where he reads nature like a book, and the nature poetry of the latter, where nature mirrors the poet’s inner being. ‘Really to know something’, Goethe averred in the introduction to his journal *Propyläen* (1797), ‘one must

look very carefully' ('Was man weiß, sieht man erst!'). To be sure, Brockes saw in natural phenomena signs directing the observer outward to the transcendental, while Goethe interpreted those signs as directing us inward deeper into nature itself and back into the soul of the observer. This apprehension of nature as sign is related to Moritz's concept of signature in the essay 'Die Signatur des Schönen' (1788–9; 'The signature of the beautiful'), which he also expressed in different terms in his seminal essay 'Über die bildende Nachahmung des Schönen' (1788; 'On the imitation of the beautiful in the fine arts'): as the experience of that which is complete unto itself. If nature was the crucible, *seeing* was the art.

The emphasis on seeing and reflecting which emerged from that fundamentally new epistemology led to the founding at mid-century of a separate discipline of aesthetics. One readily thinks of Georg Friedrich Meier's (1718–77) *Anfangsgründe aller schönen Wissenschaften* (1748; *The elements of belles lettres*), Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's (1714–62) *Aesthetica* (1750–8), Johann Joachim Winckelmann's (1717–68) *Gedanken über die Nachahmung griechischer Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerei* (1755; *Thoughts on the imitation of Greek works in the plastic arts*), Moses Mendelssohn's *Betrachtungen über die Quellen und die Verbindungen der schönen Künste und Wissenschaften* (1757; *Reflections on the origins and the interconnections of the fine arts and belles lettres*), Lessing's *Laokoon* (1766) and Johann Georg Sulzer's (1720–79) *Allgemeine Theorie der schönen Künste* (1771–4; *General theory of the fine arts*). Widely received, these works occasioned a long and vigorous debate. Aesthetics arose in response to French, English and German theorists such as Charles Batteux (1713–80), Rousseau, Helvétius, Shaftesbury, Joseph Addison (1672–1719), Edward Young (1683–1765), David Hume (1711–76), Francis Hutcheson (1694–1746), Christian Wolff (1679–1754), Breitingen and many others. The debates on the nature of the beautiful and the sublime, on the differences between literature and the plastic arts, on the Aristotelian concepts of fear and pity in tragedy, on the wondrous and the monstrous took place concurrently with the rise of the modern domestic novel, the evolution of the bourgeois drama (e.g. *Emilia Galotti*, 1772), and the popularity of 'Erlebnisdichtung' ('poetry of personal experience').

Meier, for example, combined Baumgarten's rational aesthetics with the evocativeness of sensibility in a move towards what we now call reception aesthetics. Mendelssohn grounded pleasure both in the beauty of external arrangement and in the perfection of inner moral ordering; he thus provided an initial argument for the autonomy of the

aesthetic experience. Especially influential were Winckelmann and Lessing. Winckelmann re-established *kalokagathia* ('the good and the beautiful') as the anthropological ideal with its qualities of 'edle Einfalt und stille Größe' ('noble simplicity and quiet grandeur'). Lessing identified the essence of aesthetic experience, whether in the fine arts or belles lettres, as residing in movement either implicit or explicit, since nature is always changing. Thus it is incumbent upon the artist to allow the imagination free reign in order to experience the full effect of emotional evocation.¹⁶ This insight marks a major juncture in the general history of aesthetics; namely, construction ('Werkästhetik') on the one hand and textual reception ('Wirkungsästhetik') on the other.¹⁷

As a consequence, Lessing urges the artist to think 'in transitions' ('transitorisch denken'), in keeping with the movement of nature (*LW* III, 22). In literature this appears in the chronological sequence of action. In the fine arts it is embodied in the configuration of shapes and colours in space. Because of the lack of overt movement in the fine arts, the artist must focus on the moment most pregnant with significance, one which insinuates foregoing and succeeding action frozen in the moment chosen for portrayal (89–90). Dramatic art is thus 'die lebendige Malerei des Schauspielers' (25, 'the living painting of the actor'); utilising time and space to realise its movement, dramatic art stands between the fine arts and poetry (*LW* II, 144). The suffering of the tragic hero is not physical but spiritual – the very point made in regard to the Laokoon group. Thus Emilia Galotti's suffering, for example, is not physical but moral. From this it follows that the sensations of 'Furcht' (fear) and 'Mitleid' (compassion) – which as Lessing argues must be combined in the same individual and conjoined with love in order for the observer to experience their full effect – are essentially related to the dynamic principle. Compassion is aroused at the sight of undeserved suffering; fear is possible only if we can see ourselves in the tragic figure; that is, if the tragic figure is a mixed character, neither a paragon of virtue nor a black-hearted villain (*LW* II, 420, 446). The purpose of fear and compassion in tragedy is to bring about a cathartic response in the spectator, to purify the emotions and transform passion into virtuous acts: Aristotle's 'philanthropy' (427, 434).

The awareness of the moment of receptivity and the importance of the recipient's interactive response to the aesthetic stimulus to realise its full intent is amply obvious in Lessing's now classic interpretation. One commonly speaks of 'productive reception'. However, there is a prehistory leading up to the innovative moves by Meier, Mendelssohn and

Lessing. That prehistory – largely ignored, yet intriguing and innovative in its own right – is the focus of the remainder of this chapter. What one should not expect, however, is an exclusive focus on the aesthetic debates of the era. Our topic is much broader. Moreover, the reader will search in vain for a discussion of the ‘underside’ of the Enlightenment. The monstrous, the un-beautiful, the terrifying as aesthetic categories belong to a different discussion, the participants in which no longer believe in the salutary powers of reason and imagination and have lost confidence in man’s goodness and nature’s benevolence.¹⁸

In what follows the central themes revolve around the poles of criticism and experience and are summed up by the three guiding principles of Enlightenment inquiry as expressed in Kant’s *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*: ‘Was kann ich wissen?’ (‘What can I know?’); ‘Was soll ich tun?’ (‘What should I do?’); ‘Was darf ich hoffen?’ (‘What may I hope for?’) (K IV, 677). The first (‘kann’) is speculative in nature and underscores epistemological limits. The second (‘soll’) is practical and foregrounds the ethical component of human actions. The third (‘darf’) is both theoretical and practical, because the inquiry into what one should do is premised on the assumption that there is some transcendental good which answers the query: ‘What should I do?’ These queries should act as a beacon, lighting the path from start to finish. The goal of human development is the attainment of happiness and inner tranquillity. In the following, then, the German philosophers Thomasius, Leibniz, Wolff, Hamann and Herder will be highlighted.

To pre-empt our conclusion: philosophy and literature in the Age of Enlightenment were epistemic tools for exploring the self, the limits of knowledge, the vocation of man, the inner workings of nature, for explaining the body–mind problematic and for establishing the appropriate relationship between individual freedom and social duty. The vocation or destiny of man remained a primary concern from Johann Joachim Spalding’s (1714–1804) *Betrachtung über die Bestimmung des Menschen* (1748; *Observations on the vocation of humankind*) to Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s (1762–1814) *Bestimmung des Menschen* (1800; *Vocation of humankind*).¹⁹ Unlike previous philosophical schools, the Enlightenment possessed a sustained, self-critical attitude which proved to be part and parcel of what it means to be human and what the limits of man’s control of nature are. Since the German *Aufklärung* was initially centred at universities (Halle, Leipzig, Göttingen), it succeeded in educating whole generations of lawyers, doctors, municipal administrators, court advisors, educators, professors, publishers and journalists to the new way of conceptualising

the self and the world. That Enlightenment project of education and aestheticisation began in Saxony in the late seventeenth century with Christian Thomasius, the 'father' of the German Enlightenment; it found characteristic expression in Lessing's *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* (1781; *The education of the human race*) and continues into the present day as a 'significant force' (Troeltsch), as a *philosophia perennis* (Améry), a learning process aimed at studying the 'energies of the mind' (Cassirer), and as 'trust' (Schneiders) in the powers of reason.²⁰ An 'attitude of mind rather than a course in science and philosophy', the Enlightenment permeated all levels of intellectual pursuits.²¹ Thus Norbert Hinske speaks of its 'programmatically character', whereas Peter Gay emphasises that the Enlightenment was more a 'Revolt against Rationalism' than an 'Age of Reason'.²²

MONADOLOGY: A MODERN ONTOLOGY

A certain continuity from the Reformation to the *Aufklärung* is discernible. For one thing, the Protestant work ethic remained intact. For another, the humanistic emphasis on education and development of human potential lost none of its attractiveness. From Leibniz, Thomasius, Wolff and Spalding to Kant and Fichte, the Enlightenment sought to define human destiny in clear, universally valid, anthropological terms, and not in psychologically individualistic ones. Two cardinal models held sway: that of the quietist and that of the activist. Through contemplation and meditation on the transcendental good and denial of the material body, the introverted quietist sought to move closer to the divine and thus achieve human perfection. The activist sought to achieve perfection through wilful engagement with the world. This duality is reminiscent of Martin Luther's distinction between the inner and the outer man, whereby the outer must be subordinate to the inner. That goal is to be achieved by abstinence, fasting, and denial of the flesh in general. A primary duty of humankind on earth was to love and serve one's fellows. That service was an end in itself, not a means to an end. Similarly, as a citizen of a particular state, one's task was to be a good and useful citizen by executing one's duties and professional responsibilities for the general welfare. The individual's value as a Christian was measured by the degree of empathetic love for one's neighbour, while the individual's value as a citizen was measured in terms of utility within the community.²³ In the seventeenth century it was the courtier, not the burgher, who felt a need for *Bildung* (education, development). The latter was consigned to obedience. At

the turn of the century, there was not yet any philosophical justification for a civil vocation of humankind. Neither courtly philosophy, with its disdain of bourgeois values, nor academic scholasticism, with its speculative thrust, proved to be appropriate guides for the emergent ideals of practicality and productivity within the growing middle classes. The early Enlightenment thus had a dual objective: to recast the vocation of the human race as *vita activa* and to legitimise middle-class virtues as the higher values. The attempt at legitimisation has a speculative moment in Leibniz's theory of monads and a practical side in Thomasius's concept of wisdom.

Leibniz was the most significant pre-Kantian German philosopher, and the influence of his system was magnified thanks to its popularisation by the Leipzig professors Wolff and Gottsched. Wieland, Lessing, Herder, Goethe and Schiller were among those who acknowledged their debt to him. Combining theological concepts of teleology with natural philosophy, Leibniz constructed a rationalistic system to resolve the Cartesian duality of the body–soul problem. By positing a pre-established harmony since the birth of the universe between spirit and matter which is rooted in the dynamic principle of becoming ('Werden'), Leibniz ushered in a new union between mechanistic nature and Christian belief. His is a systematic undertaking to reveal the unity of the world by conjoining theodicy, ethics, metaphysics and natural philosophy in a single vision.²⁴

Perhaps Leibniz's most seminal and representative work is the *Monadology* (L, 179–94), written in 1714. It contains the culmination of his thinking about substance, and provides the basis for a powerful reductionist metaphysics underlying his entire philosophical system.²⁵ Penned as a succinct introduction to his longer and more elaborate treatise on the place of evil in a divinely ordained universe, *Theodicy* (1710; *Essais de théodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l'homme et l'origine du mal*), the *Monadology* was first published posthumously in a German translation in 1720. The main themes elaborated in this slim work are central to understanding the entire following epoch: (1) the concept of organic growth; (2) the notion of perfectibility; (3) optimism or the notion of the best of all possible worlds; (4) the idea that being is actually becoming; (5) the concept of diversity as a fundamental characteristic of unity; and (6) self-reflexivity as the telos (goal or purpose) of human existence. The inherent optimism of this theory is grounded on the one hand in the principle of self-determination of each monad (and therefore of each individual human being) and on the other in the positing of a telos toward which

all monads evolve. That telos is anchored in a transcendent being with which the individual sentient monads are in contact.

Defined as indivisible substance, the smallest in creation, the monad is so to speak without windows (§7). Each is marked by its own unique characteristics (individuality) and evolves according to its own internal principle at its own pace towards the fulfilment of its internal principle (§§10–11). Although simple, i.e. without parts, the monad nonetheless contains a plethora of internal affections and relations. These explain the principle of internal transformations, i.e., the degrees by which a thing changes and a thing remains the same (§13) without direct influence on its internal workings from another monad.²⁶ A dialectic of exertion and passivity characterises that process (§52). Neither essentially material in nature nor subject to externally deterministic laws, the monad thus appears as the expression of the principle of self-realisation. Leibniz uses garden, plant and animal metaphors to illustrate this (§§67, 74). While every monad is different (§9), operating like organic matter (§§71–3) or germinating seeds (§74), its nature is representative, and is thus a mirror of the universe as a whole. As such the individual monads are connected directly to God, ‘who is the cause of this correspondence between their phenomena’, and thus are indirectly connected to one another. Otherwise ‘there would be no interconnexion’ (L, 27).

Actually, there is no completely new beginning in nature, ‘for monads can only begin or end all at once’ – by creation or annihilation (§6). Rather, a non-linear rejuvenation obtains, so that living forms constitute an encompassing unity of the whole: ‘not only will there be no birth, but also no complete destruction, no death’ in the world (§76). That is because ‘there is no waste, nothing sterile, nothing lifeless in the universe; no chaos, no confusion, save in appearance’ (§69). When body and soul are conjoined, each functions independently according to its own evolutionary principles; yet each acts as if its ‘twin’ did not exist (§81), for body and soul co-operate according to a pre-established harmony (§78). In its self-conscious form, the monad is more properly an ‘entelechy’ (§18) and as such is a reflection of the primary unity (§47), of the Deity or formative energy expressed as knowledge and will (§48), which is the final grounding of all existence (§§39–44). Knowledge of necessary and eternal truths leads via a process of abstraction to ‘reflexive acts’. These reflexive acts are the chief objects of reason and distinguish humans from other sentient beings. By directing perception at the self, humans form an awareness of an ‘I’. Leibniz equates this self-consciousness to the essence of humanity, its ‘substance’: ‘in thinking of ourselves, we think

of being, of substance, of the simple and the compound, of the immaterial and of God himself' (§30). As the 'Supreme Substance' (§40) or 'Necessary Being' (§45), God is the unlimited expression of all that is finite in us. These sections are an echo of his earlier essay, 'Of an *organum* or *ars magna* of thinking' (c. 1679), where Leibniz had asserted: 'The most powerful of human faculties is the *power of thinking*'. Indeed, the cultivation of self-reflexive reason constitutes 'the supreme happiness of man', because fully developed reason equates to 'the greatest possible increase in his perfection' (L, 1). Virtue and happiness are thus equated with 'an active progressive attitude', in which we not only apprehend the world's inherent tendency toward ever greater perfection, but also replicate it through our own deeds and interactions with others to advance them toward perfection as well.²⁷ In this regard, Leibniz echoes a main tenet of Spinoza (*Ethics*, pp. 93, 199). He also clearly provides a basis of the later *Bildungsroman*.

While God is necessary, humans are 'accidental'. Because the mind of God is the region whence all essences and realised manifestations spring and in which all future imaginable manifestations reside (§43), it guarantees the legitimacy of the imagination and the wondrous (§44). In fact, that which is thinkable, imaginable and possible has the right to insist upon its realisation (§54). Given that supposition, Leibniz concludes that polyperspectivity – diversity – is the hallmark of creation, although there is but one universe (§57). Thus the greater the diversity, the higher the degree of order (§58). Perfection is nothing other than the relative magnitude of the positive realisation of an infinite potential, because the absolute realisation of that infinite potential is possible in God alone (§41).²⁸ In 'A résumé of metaphysics' (c. 1697), which summarises the main theses of *On the ultimate origination of things* (1697), Leibniz had averred: '*everything possible demands existence*, inasmuch as it is founded on a necessary being which actually exists, and without which there is no way by which something possible may arrive at actuality' (L, 145). The 'dominant Unity of the universe', he adds, 'not only rules the world, but also constructs or makes it; and it is higher than the world and, if I may so put it, extramundane; it is thus the ultimate reason of things' (L, 136). Subsequently, this principle of the unity in the multiplicity of all actual and especially possible worlds becomes the cornerstone of the new eighteenth-century aesthetics with its emphasis on the quantifiability of unity in multiplicity.²⁹ The direct link to the Deity (and thus the Unity) is the intellect with its unique faculty of imagination. The repeated process of endeavouring to reveal the infinitely possible leads through Bodmer's

and Breitering's theory of the imagination around 1730 to its literary realisation in Wieland's novel, *Don Sylvio von Rosalba* (1764), and his *Komische Erzählungen* (1762; *Comic tales*), to Goethe's quintessential truth seeker, Faust, at century's end. The notion of God as the site of all manifestations past, present and future points forward to the myth of the eternally creative Mothers in *Faust II* (1831; lines 6283–9).

Transposed to the political realm, the monadology suggests a model for enlightened monarchy. Sentient beings are related to the Deity like the sons to the father or the subjects to the monarch. The assemblage of all sentient beings under the leadership of the most perfect of rulers would constitute the City of God (§85). In that perfect state, the moral world and the natural world would exist in harmony (§86). As architect of the world-machine and as the lawgiver in the spiritual realm of grace, God has created a unified system which necessarily leads from the realm of nature to grace, forgiveness, salvation and unity (§88). If we emphasise the moral freedom of each subject in the state so that no one is used instrumentally and all are equal, we can recognise here the framework for Schiller's aesthetic state as formulated in his *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* (1795; *On the aesthetic education of humankind*). Moreover Leibniz suggests, in a manner seemingly anticipating Schiller's view of nemesis in his philosophical poem 'Resignation' (1782) or his classical trilogy *Wallenstein* (1799), that world history passes its own moral judgement by containing its own rewards and punishments (§89). Even Wieland's philosophical novels, *Agathon* and *Agathodämon* (1799; *Agathodaemon*) could be approached from the perspective of Leibnizian ontology.

The final article of the *Monadology* gives rise to perhaps the greatest legacy, for it is here that Leibniz speaks of the best of all possible worlds, stating: 'if we could sufficiently understand the order of the universe, we should find that it surpasses all the desires of the most wise, and that it is impossible to make it better than it is' (§90). Ignoring the disclaimer at the beginning of this statement, first Voltaire in *Candide* (1759), then Johann Karl Wezel in his novel, *Belphegor oder die unwahrscheinlichste Geschichte der Welt* (1776; *Belphegor or the most unlikely tale in the world*) bitinglly satirised the Leibnizian concept of the best of all possible worlds.³⁰

Moreover, Leibniz argues that love forms the cornerstone of his optimistic ontology (§90). The Deity has created the world just as it should be and He has done so out of pure love, the kind that allows participation in the joy of the loved one. The wise and virtuous, Leibniz avers, will attend to all that which appears to coincide with the suspected or predetermined Divine Will, but will nonetheless be content with that which

God actually provides in his mysterious ways (§90). Inherent in this view are the keystone virtues of happiness and contentment which mark Enlightenment literature from Haller's didactic poem *Die Alpen* (1729; *The Alps*), Schnabel's 'Robinsonade' *Insel Felsenburg* (1731; *Felsenburg Island*), Hagedorn's narrative poem 'Johann der muntere Seifensieder' (1738; 'Johann the cheerful soapmaker'), Gellert's novel *Das Leben der schwedischen Gräfin von G**** (1747; *The life of the Swedish Countess of G****), Sophie von La Roche's *Das Fräulein von Sternheim* (1771; *Miss Sternheim*), to Lessing's epoch-making play *Nathan der Weise* and Wieland's aforementioned novels of development. Even Schiller's early philosophical essay 'Theosophie des Julius' (1786; 'Julius's theosophy') echoes these fundamental views of sympathetic response to others as the cornerstone of happiness in the realisation of human potential.

Leibniz's ontology also underlies Schiller's concept of the historical moment as the product of all that has gone before and the result of no simple linear causal relationship. It would be fascinating to do a comparison of the concepts of history in the *Monadology* (§22) and Schiller's inaugural Jena lecture as Professor of History, 'Was heißt und zu welchem Ende studiert man Universalgeschichte?' (1789; 'What is and to what purpose does one study universal history?'). One could, of course, point to Kant's 'Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht' (1784; 'Idea for a universal history from a cosmopolitan point of view') as the immediate catalyst, yet Kant himself stands in a tradition dating from Leibniz, as is obvious from the opening passage of that famous essay (*PW*, 249).

Then too the polyvalence of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* might be seen through the lens of Leibniz's monadology. Wilhelm Meister's self-directed development evolves according to its own inner inscription, yet is nudged along or distracted momentarily from its predestined course by the great array of characters Wilhelm meets along the way (the Abbé, Marianne, Lothario, Jarno, the beautiful soul, Natalie, Mignon, the Harper, Theresa, Friedrich, etc.). The centrepiece of the novel, 'Bekenntnisse einer schönen Seele' ('Confessions of a beautiful soul'; Book 6), contains some of the clearest formulations on the concept of development (*Bildung*), the dynamic principle, the inherent goodness of the instinct for perfectibility and the revelation of God in nature. Even granting the usual reference to Schiller to explain the confluence of 'Pflicht' (duty) and 'Neigung' (inclination) in the 'schöne Seele' (beautiful soul), it is difficult to ignore the echoes of Leibnizian ethics. All the while, however, the secret Tower Society is pulling the strings, so to speak, to

ensure that each encounter contributes to Wilhelm's education, advancing him toward his ultimate destiny and integration into society. In this sense, the 'Turmgesellschaft' acts much like the 'Urmonade' in Leibniz's speculative system.

REASON, SENTIMENT AND THE *SUMMUM BONUM*

Christian Thomasius studied law and philosophy and lectured for ten years in philosophy at the University of Leipzig until he was censored for his views and forced to leave. Thus he experienced a fate similar to Pierre Bayle (1647–1706) in The Hague. Thomasius is important because of his popularising influence, but also because he did not separate reason and revelation as Bayle did, although theology and philosophy were kept separate. In 1687 he caused a minor furore in Leipzig by lecturing in German rather than in the traditional Latin of the scholar. His topic was one of immediate concern: 'In welcher Gestalt solle man denen Frantzosen im gemeinen Leben und Wandel nachahmen?' ('What is the proper form for imitating the French in the round of everyday life?'). Thomasius's response is to foreground the ideal of the *honnête homme* who is marked by all that is good, noble, and honest in human interaction. Aligned with the ideal man is the essence of gallantry, the *bon sens*. Strikingly – and this point is little noted in research on women's history – Thomasius offers the admission of women to university studies as the best prospect for achieving a reform of the German academy, for they, he says, have not been spoiled or misled as have their male counterparts.

Yet more significant for our particular purposes with regard to the spread of Enlightenment and the popularisation of its ideals is Thomasius's eclectic approach to style and content. Rejecting the scholastic philosophy of his day as too speculative, he pleaded for an entertaining approach in doing philosophy. This new model he developed through reading and criticising narrative literature. In his journalistic *Lustige und ernsthafftige Monats-Gespräche* (1688–90; *Witty and earnest monthly conversations*) he characterised his new, more effective style as being simultaneously useful and entertaining, thereby sounding the Horatian directive *prodesse et delectare*. Such works are the best because they 'could be read by the greatest number of readers' (Hinske-Specht, 107). This exhortation echoed throughout the literature of the Enlightenment. Strikingly, Gottsched included his translation of Horace's *Ars poetica* (*The art of poetry*) in place of a preface to the fourth edition of his *Versuch einer critischen Dichtkunst* (1752, first edition 1730; *Essay on a theory of literature*), the first to

have a more general impact. Hagedorn and Lange viewed Horace as the supreme authority around mid-century. Later in the century, Wieland turned to Horace's reflections on the aesthetic ideal in his epistle to the Pisones, translating it for a modern audience. The result was published in 1782 as *Horaz. Über die Dichtkunst* (*Horace. On poetry*) and quickly became the classical translation. In many ways it laid the groundwork for the aesthetic ideals of the emergent period of Weimar Classicism.

To be sure, Thomasius's more academic work is not composed in such a popular style. His *Vernunftlehre* (1691; *Logic*) contains his philosophical system. Perceiving that the parameters of philosophical knowledge have been set too wide, so that the results are unproductive, Thomasius proposes to redirect attention to the practical, ethical knowledge needed for a *vita activa*. In doing so, he redefined scholarly erudition ('Gelehrtheit') and transformed it into *Bildung*. 'Erudition is a recognition by means of which an individual is enabled to distinguish the true from the false, the good from evil. It makes him capable of understanding the essence of the true or, as the case may be, of proffering probable causes of it in order to advance his own temporal and eternal welfare and that of others in the flux of social life.'³¹ Consequently, knowledge is not supposed to be its own end. Rejecting the notion of innate ideas, Thomasius sets aside deductive in favour of inductive logic based on experience and practicality. In this he echoes John Locke's rejection of innate ideas in his *Essay on human understanding* (1690) and points forward to Andreas Rüdiger's similar move in his *Philosophia pragmatica* (1723; *Pragmatic philosophy*).³² Whatever is not manifest in nature itself is inaccessible to the mind. The essence of God cannot therefore be grasped by the intellect. The latter must be directed at problems of a practical and empirical kind in an effort to enhance one's usefulness and productivity. So employed, reason appears as 'sound or salubrious' ('gesund'). For this reason, Thomasius retains a belief in revelation as being separate from the operations of the mind. Obviously, then, he neither anticipates nor participates in the ensuing physico-theological movement which gripped many writers in the first decades of the eighteenth century, notably Brockes.

Yet the notion of sound reason forms the basis of much of Enlightenment thought. It evolved as the personal ideal promulgated in the literature of the era and served as the source of 'Popularphilosophie' which later took hold and held sway for decades. Sound reason knows its limits, seeks not to query abstract problems, and concerns itself only with those issues having an immediate bearing on one's functioning in society. In short, Thomasius's intention is to make philosophy socially

acceptable by transforming it into an instrument of efficacy. As worldly wisdom ('Weltweisheit'), it is a matter of education through knowledge. Everything is subject to the scrutiny of reason except for logic itself and belief in external reality. As such salubrious reason cannot err. Errors arise rather through the moral degeneracy of humankind, through arrogance. Nonetheless, reason is not set up as the absolute guide, for Thomasius warns us against radical scepticism, pointing to an inner, deep-lying feeling of certainty. That inner, non-rational guide keeps the seeker on even keel. Here one is reminded of Agathon's pivotal response to the materialistic sceptic Hippias, who has just argued in the best Sophist tradition against the existence of God. Agathon does not need a long-drawn-out rational explanation; an inner instinct assures him that the Deity does exist, just as his senses convince him that the sun is warm and that his body is his. His conclusion? 'I feel, therefore I am.'³³ The presence of this innate feeling of certitude reveals that the Enlightenment did have an inherent proclivity to sensibility.³⁴

By prioritising 'gesunde Vernunft' over speculative reason, Thomasius believed that he had created a transition from Spinoza's ethics of knowledge to an ethic of the active life. In his *Einleitung zur Sittenlehre* (1696; *Introduction to ethics*) Thomasius laid the foundation for the new ethic. Its highest goal is inner contentment or 'Ruhe des Gemütes', which he labels the *summum bonum* (Hinske-Specht, 49). Unlike Spinoza, who posited a harmony between the insights of reason and the action of the will (*Ethics*, 76; prop. xvix), Thomasius declared that the intellect could only show the way to the supreme good, whereas human will led man astray. Reason is good, while the will is deleterious or evil. Man lives up to his vocation, that is, actualises the *summum bonum*, when he seeks his freedom in nothing other than the service and advancement of his fellows.³⁵ Thomasius's characterisation of the supreme good contains a series of objectives aligned with the Enlightenment project in general: the fundamental sociability of the age, love of and service to one's fellow man as the leading principle in this sociability, the resultant obligation of tolerance, and the call for compassion.

Awareness of the social dependency of humankind Thomasius calls love. Anticipating Rousseau's reflections on the refinement of *amour de soi* through the sentiment of natural compassion by half a century (but setting the accents somewhat differently), Thomasius claims that love of one's fellow man is stronger than self-love, since one cannot do without one's fellow man. From this he concludes that love, not reason, is the true hallmark of humankind. Again the role of emotion, of feeling, in defining

the human destiny is manifest. It is not a trait to be relegated simply to the sentimentalists, Lessing, Wieland or the *Sturm und Drang* generation. Everyone partakes of this sentiment, even the villainous. The difference between the villainous and the virtuous lies in the fact that the former erroneously believe that they prefer themselves to everyone else, whereas the virtuous know full well that others are more important than the self (Hinske-Specht, 50). The individual is obligated to nurture the villainous in the hope of transforming him into an instrument for the good in society at large. Presented with the choice between being a good citizen and a self-absorbed individual, the human being has a moral obligation to choose the former. Yet this decision cannot be imposed from without; it must be one's own personal choice. From this foregrounding of the social function follows the principle of equality of all burghers. For Thomasius, then, reason alone cannot lead to an active life; virtue requires brotherly love to motivate the will. Consequently, he retracts in the *Sittenlehre* (1696) his previous position in the *Vernunftlehre* (1691). Philanthropy, which is now identified with virtue, does not exist as such in the world. But it is a concept which dovetails with the socio-economic reality of the emergent middle classes. Bound to the ego, the will is necessarily instinct-driven. This situation caused a dilemma in that the will was constantly drawn to self-love ('Selbstliebe') and away from brotherly love ('Nächstenliebe'). To overcome this problem, Thomasius substituted the dictate to serve others ('Nächstendienst') for brotherly love. The *service* of one's fellow man foregrounded the active engagement for the general welfare as opposed to the more passive – and perhaps self-indulgent – *love* of one's fellow beings. By philosophically grounding human destiny in the active principle, Thomasius laid the foundation for the ensuing century.

This envisioning of the functions of reason and the will finds literary expression in early Enlightenment novels such as Schnabel's *Insel Felsenburg* and Gellert's *Leben der schwedischen Gräfin von G****. Moreover, the call to empathise with the suffering of others leads to Lessing's positing 'Mitleid' (compassion, pity) as the cornerstone of his new theory of tragedy developed in his correspondence with Mendelssohn and Friedrich Nicolai (1733–1811), *Briefwechsel über das Trauerspiel* (1759; *Letters on tragedy*). In November 1756 Lessing wrote to Nicolai: 'the most compassionate person is the best person, one who is most inclined to all social virtues and all kinds of generosity. Thus, whoever makes us compassionate makes us better and more virtuous, and tragedy that does the former, also accomplishes the latter; or – does the former in order to bring about the latter.'³⁶ For him compassion is the quintessentially social

virtue. In making this move he rejects the classicistic view of the passions as dangerous without the guidance of reason and ascribes constitutive powers to sympathetic love, for it leads to benevolent acts.

In its sentimental form this ideology of compassion appears in Lessing's *Miß Sara Sampson* (1755), in Sophie La Roche's Richardsonian narrative of seduction *Das Fräulein von Sternheim*, and – in destructive form – in Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774; *The sufferings of young Werther*). Lessing's *Nathan* is perhaps the definitive expression in a balanced form, for Nathan is the paragon of quiet understanding, selfless service, unconditional love of his fellow humans, insistence on inner tranquillity, and preference for the active over the contemplative life. Like Job before him – and in compliance with the subjection of the individual will to the Divine will – Nathan is wise because he finally recognises the inadequacy of human understanding in the face of inscrutable mysteries. Fittingly, both Agathon and Wilhelm Meister conclude their 'apprenticeships' with the knowledge that they can best fulfil their human destiny by applying their study of nature and of the human psyche in the service of others. While Agathon has aspirations of government service in Tarentum (despite his disastrous experiences in Syracuse), Wilhelm Meister ultimately decides upon a medical profession. Miss Sternheim devotes herself to the education of children and the betterment of women. All can be seen as literary formulations of the fundamental concept of the *summum bonum* advocated by Thomasius and others.

Spinoza had similarly expressed the supreme ideal of human perfection in his *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione* (1677; *Treatise on the correction of the intellect*), which is really a piece on how to use one's intellect. He averred that all humans yearn for more constancy in the search for perfection. The movement to that goal depends on individual and collaborative effort. Spinoza writes:

The supreme good, however, is to reach a point such that he, together with other individuals if possible, enjoys such a [constant] nature. What that nature is . . . is the knowledge of the union that the mind has with the whole of nature. This, then, is the end towards which I strive: namely, to endeavour to acquire such a nature, and to endeavour that many others should acquire it with me. That is, it also belongs to my happiness that I should take pains to ensure that many other people should understand what I understand, so that their intellect and desire agree with mine. (Preface, *Ethics*, 226)

Thus, only that knowledge of nature is valued which is crucial in achieving sociable perfection: namely, moral philosophy, the education of